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Fagan, James Octavius

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[Boston?]

[1916]

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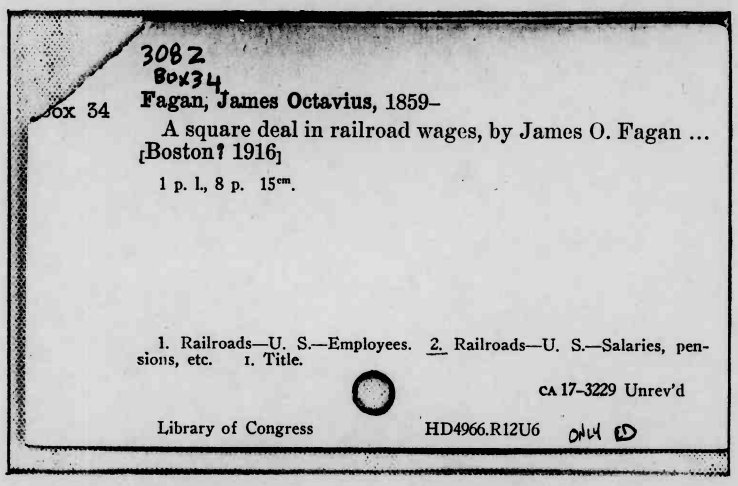

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A Square Deal in Railroad Wages

By JAMES O. FAGAN
The Railroad Signalman

1916?

James O. Fagan, known the country over as "The Railroad Signalman," was an obscure towerman on a New England railroad until he began writing his impressions and opinions of railroading for the magazines. Out of his thirty years' experience as a humble worker he has given the public the most vivid picture of actual working conditions in this great industry of any writer in the country. His first book, "The Confessions of a Railroad Signalman," has become a classic. This was followed by his observations on "Labor and the Railroads." In the article which follows Mr. Fagan discusses the present threat of a nation-wide strike on the railroads from the point of view of the 1,400,000 other railroad employes who are less highly paid than the train service men.

A SQUARE DEAL IN RAILROAD WAGES

First and foremost among the problems to which my studies were directed during 30 odd years of service on the railroads was the great industrial struggle that was going on all the time for the improvement of working conditions and to secure for the great body of workers substantial and generous wages. Along these lines of endeavor, in course of time, railroad men were conspicuously successful.

In working out their betterment plans these men did not wait for the slow development of the community or national conscience. They went to work among themselves and invented a machine founded on organization and team work. In a very few years this machine revolutionized the railroad business in this country from top to bottom, and introduced new conceptions into the public mind in regard to work and wages and the employes' status in relation to the same.

For one thing, in particular, these comparatively few years of machine influence have been sufficient to shift the centre of interest in the matter of wages, and management relating thereto, from its supposed headquarters in Wall Street to an indefinite location in what you may call Wheel Street. In other words, the men who grease the wheels, turn the wheels,

and steer the wheels on the railroads to-day are nearer than ever before to holding the balance of power when it comes to the adjustment of payrolls and kindred interests.

Square Deal for All Workers

It is in the midst of an industrial situation of this description that the railroad managers to-day, as it seems to me, are trying to steer an impartial course between their manifest duty to the railroads and the people on the one hand, and their sense of justice to all classes of employes on the other. On the part of the managers it is certainly a laborious, a delicate and an extremely worryful undertaking, and the people who are taking part and those who are interested in the wage controversy at the present time will do well to bear this end of the situation in mind.

But when we begin to talk about justice to all concerned in this matter of work and wages on the railroads we must not forget the usual conception of a square deal that obtains almost universally to-day among right thinking people. In a given army of workers with common interests in an establishment which is run and is dependent throughout on the co-operative efforts singly and collectively of all the units, what kind of an arrangement it may well be asked is "justice to all concerned"?

Is a demand for justice, in other words, for a large increase in wages from one group of these units to be complied with without any regard to similar demands from other groups when the supplies for

meeting the demands of all the groups are a common fund, this fund in the case of the railroads, being the people's pocketbook? If justice is to have anything to do with the matter it would certainly seem as if there ought to be some understanding or connection, some concerted action and agreement in such matters between all the different groups and the managers.

Power of the Unions

The point at issue in the present controversy then, is not simply that in the year 1916 a certain group of organized workers have determined to advance their particular interests in a very strenuous way but in particular that a comparatively small number of employes forming the train service group, have actually got into the habit of late years of persistently and at times almost forcibly holding up the relief that is due to other groups which, although numerically ever so much larger, are yet for various reasons not quite so strenuous.

Now as it seems to me, this constantly recurring action of the train service men in relation to wages and conditions in their particular department arises to begin with from a somewhat exaggerated idea or at least a misconception of their own relative importance in the field of railroad industry. The close relationship between the train service men and the travelling public, I think, accounts for a good deal of this misconception. Indeed, roughly speaking, in the public mind, the engineers, the conductors, the firemen, the trainmen and the managers consti-

tute the average vision as it were of railroad life in the public mind. And let no one presume for a minute to question either the work or the spirit of this "Big Four" or "Five" combination.

But in all justice to the rest of the service I think it is only fair to remind the public that engaged in the very heart and pith of the railroad business, there are others. After going over the matter very carefully in my own mind and judging the situation simply on the basis of my own knowledge and experience I venture to submit the following table of human values in the specific train service circle of railroad interests. The relative importance of different classes of railroad employes is as follows:

(1) Train Dispatchers (The Directors of Trains).
(2) Section Foremen (The Maintainers of Roadbeds).
(3) Engineers, Towermen, Conductors.
(4) Telegraph Operators.
(5) Firemen, Sectionmen (skilled).
(6) Brakemen.

Inequality of Wages

With this estimate in mind a comparison of wages received by these different classes of employes is very illuminating. The yearly average of wages may be roughly stated as follows: Train Dispatchers, $1,500; Engineers, $1,800; Conductors, $1,500; Firemen, $1,000; Trainmen, $1,000; Section Foremen, $750; Towermen, $800; Telegraph Operators, $700; Sectionmen, $500.

One of the regrettable features of this situation is that the gap between the Big

Four men and other employes has for years been steadily widening. Between 1904 and 1914 the increases in the annual wages of train service employes varied from 35 per cent. for the enginemen to 45 per cent. for brakemen. The increase in the wages of clerks meantime was 14.8 per cent., of station agents 25.7 per cent., of section foremen 27.5 per cent.

In forming my estimates of the relative value to the railroads and the people of services in the operating department of railroads I have carefully considered and taken into account the following qualifications and activities: Responsibility, brain work, manual labor, technical knowledge, exposure to the elements, and training or apprenticeship required to qualify. I don't ask anybody to vouch for my estimate of the actual or comparative value of the services of section foremen, towermen, or telegraph operators. I simply say that I have watched these men as well as the others at their work through a long course of years and the foregoing are the impressions I received.

As for the lowly sectionman, if anyone is possessed with the idea that this work when well done is not "skilled," I would invite him, the average trainman, for example, to tackle the sectionman's job with the bar or the hammer for a single day. And furthermore, let me add to the specific illustrations I have given, the general information that for 1914, the latest year for which the official figures are available, the total payroll was $1,381,069,811 for 1,710,000 men. Of the total payroll amount the train service employes received an average of roughly

$1,240 a man, while the other employes, including the officers, received an average of a little over $700 a year.

So far, then, we have had no indication of any immediate necessity or call, so far as wages or treatment are concerned or in the interests of justice of any kind, for adding $100,000,000 to the payrolls of the railroads or to the taxes, direct or indirect, of the people at large, for the benefit of the train service employes.

Train Men a "Preferred Class"

While it is true then, according to the evidence, that the Big Four combination of railroad employes are receiving to-day a good deal more than their share of the general payroll fund, and of public recognition, it is also true that in response to outside pressure by arbitrators and otherwise, railroad managers have been obliged to place these men on a preferential basis. In other words, these 400,000 men have come to be looked upon in railroad circles as the "preferred stock" among employes.

No other class of workers in any department has ever received the same consideration in the matters of wages and working conditions. If there ever was any danger of these men being left out in the cold by any economical or other contrivance of the management, or weather arrangements of the Deity, it has long since been eliminated. I am writing quite frankly on this phase of the situation in order to emphasize the treatment and wages of the men in the train service as compared with the usual situation in other departments.

Of all the groups concerned in the railroad business the engineers, perhaps, have the most distinctive methods for pay slip development. In the recent Western Engineers' Arbitration I noticed that the roads presented figures showing payments to engineers and firemen for which no actual service either in miles or hours had been rendered by the men. For the fiscal year 1912-13 these Western roads paid in this way $1,400,000 for so-called constructive, or as I should say, presumptive mileage, where the men rendered no actual service. In concrete form this unproductive expenditure works out in this way: if an engineer runs 80 miles in 7 hours he is allowed his 100 mile minimum. In other words, the railroad pays for 20 miles it does not get, or for 2 hours' work the engineer does not perform.

Wages Unreasonably High

Any way the engineer cares to figure out his pay slip, under the dual standard of miles or hours, its "Heads he wins, tails you lose." Of course it is only right and proper that the day's work should be guaranteed by the schedule, and yet nothing but special legislation in favor of train service employes can account for such a large amount of unproductive expenditure. The Interstate Commerce Commission, as it seems to me, would very soon call attention to a financial drain of this magnitude in any other wing of the railroad business.

Finally, I wish to set down as clearly as possible and in definite order some of the reasons I have for declining to recog-

nize the so-called justice of the claims of these 400,000 train service employes for a large and universal increase of wages.

(1) Because wages in the train service to-day are already extremely high and generous.

(2) Because these wages are also unreasonably higher than those of other employes whose services are equally valuable.

(3) Because the Big Four class of employes have an exaggerated idea of their own importance as compared with the rest of the railroad world, and their demands for additional pay are founded, to quite an extent, on this misconception.

(4) Because the Big Four as a preferred class with special privileges and concessions is a reflection on the democratic ideas and principles of the American people.

(5) And finally, because while wages in the train service have been continually on the climb the tension on the responsibility of the employe has slackened while the dangers, discomforts, and hardships connected with the service have been reduced to a very satisfactory minimum.

It is for the public to sit in judgment and to weigh the evidence on one side and the other in this wage controversy, and while bearing in mind the rights and claims of the train service I am sure the decision will not be unmindful of the interests of the great army of outsiders, who are not so prosperous or fortunately situated as the Big Four.

Railroad Wage Facts

Railroad income $3,047,000,000
Railroad payroll $1,381,000,000

Out of every dollar paid by the public for transportation the employes receive 45 cents.

Railroad employes..... 1,710,000
Train employes..... 312,000
Train employes' wages.....$389,000,000

Train men are only 18 per cent of the number of employes, but they receive 28 per cent of the wages.

Train employes' wages range from $800 to $4,000 a year, averaging more than $1,200. Average wages of all other railroad workers, $700.

The train men now demand a new wage schedule that will add $75,000,000 to $100,000,000 to the railroad payroll.

Their demand is that the basic payday be changed from 10 hours to 8 hours, with an increase of 87½ per cent in the present overtime rate.

The demand is for higher wages and not for shorter hours.

THE SINGLE ISSUE IS WHETHER THE HIGHEST PAID RAILROAD WORKERS ARE ENTITLED TO STILL HIGHER PAY.

MSH 20704.

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